FORUM

Toward a planetary ethnography?
From "frictions" to "tensions" in understanding post-truth capitalist power

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Abstract: It is time for anthropology to reclaim truth and speak it to capitalist power more forcefully. The rise of post-truth and the truth of our planetary socio-ecological predicaments demand this. How to do so is not straightforward. Recalibrating deconstruction and finding a new balance between epistemic solidities and shifting sands is only part of the task. The greater anthropological challenge is reorienting ethnography from *frictions* (how "global connections" fragment) to *tensions* (how and why contradictory global connections came about and endure or not). To explore this reorientation, I propose a *political ecology of truth* and the cultivation of a *planetary ethnography*. Both aspire to do anthropological justice to the dramatic transformations in our dominant planetary consciousness and the contradictory socioecological predicaments this is mired in.

Keywords: ethnography, planetary, platform capitalism, post-truth, power

What does it mean to do ethnography in the post-truth era, and what are the stakes involved for the notion of truth? This is the question addressed in the current article.[1] Unbeknownst to me then, my engagement with this question started around 2009 through a research project on how emerging digital media were changing the politics and practices of nature conservation. At first, this was a rather standard "multilevel" ethnographic project with a digital component as one of the "sites." But after three years of research along these lines, going from online conservation activists to the Southern African spaces they aimed to intervene in and back again, I realized I was missing a lot. The power structures of the digital realm were changing fast and influencing my research, but I could not clearly see how. What I did realize—around 2015—was that my multilevel ethnographic strategy of "following" relations, discourses, power, actors, and more, while informative, was increasingly limited.

Two dynamics clarified this and changed the course of my thinking. The first was the consolidation and rapid growth of online platforms and the new, interactive online structures they were building (that have since drastically reshuffled the global economy but also academia and much of daily life around the world). I see online platforms as digital intersections: they aim to be in between all of us—that is: literally everyone on the planet[2]—and everything we do

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or want in life. This powerful *in-between* position has become central to the new platform capitalist economy that many people willingly or unwillingly submit much of their lives and work to.

The second dynamic was the rise of "post-truth" as a core component of Donald Trump's election as US president and the UK Brexit campaign. These extraordinary events certainly had something to do with the new platform capitalist economy, but exactly what was unclear. What *was* clear to me was that post-truth was profoundly troubling for the actors I was studying: conservationists who firmly believe that the global ecological crisis is *the* most important and dangerous truth of our era. Now this was a conundrum if ever there was one: just when environmental scientists and conservationists were making headway in convincing the world that the ecological crisis is real, post-truth took center stage! In response, conservationists ramped up their politics, making use of the new digital platforms to spread "the truth about nature."

This was interesting but also highly problematic to me. After all, as a social scientist I was trained in the art of deconstruction, and the idea of truth seemed highly suspicious to me. "Post-truth," however, was equally troubling, especially because I do believe there is a deep, dangerous truth to our ecological predicament. Searching for a way out of this conundrum meant I had to confront the question of truth head-on.

And so I did. It culminated in a *political ecology of truth* that explores an epistemological positioning for combining ethnographic knowledge and political economy under platform capitalism.[3] But while I believe this outlook on truth is important, for this article it is less important than its anthropological implications; how "anthropologists can position themselves in the crisis of truth."[4] Among the many ways to answer this question, I will focus on ethnography as an anthropological method and epistemological practice of research, writing, and thinking.

My argument is that if anthropologists wish to re-explore, even reclaim truth—which I believe they should, given the emergence of post-truth and the truth of our socioecological predicaments—they will have to recalibrate the multilevel, global ethnography that many have embraced over the last decades with a *planetary ethnography* that does justice to the dramatic transformations in the dominant state of our planetary consciousness and the socioecological predicaments this is mired in.

The difference between the two is also the difference between friction and tension. Both terms are meant to ethnographically capture contradictions within our interconnected, global world. Friction, however, especially the influential conceptualization proposed by Anna Tsing, does not actually capture how "global connections" work through contradictions, defined dialectically as situations when "two seemingly opposed forces are simultaneously present within a particular situation" (Harvey 2014: 1). Instead, friction helps us to understand how global connections fragment, not how and why they became "connected" in the first place. A central claim of this article, therefore, is that frictions and tensions are dissimilar and allow for different types of ethnographic knowledge and epistemological positioning whereby the latter also allows for a reorientation toward truth.

To make this point, the article will first explore friction as a "global" ethnographic practice, illustrated through a brief exposition of my research context.[5] I will then reflect on my own ethnographic practice by taking up the question of truth in relation to digital platform power. This leads me to posit a *political ecology of truth* that I find helpful in understanding and challenging post-truth. Finally, I present some reflections about reorienting ethnography that may aid anthropological discussions on truth and political economy in relation to our contemporary planetary predicaments. Here, I will further explicate the difference between friction and tension or how to shift from a "global ethnography" to a "planetary ethnography" that aspires to do anthropological justice to (studying and understanding) the drastically changed state of the dominant planetary consciousness over the last two decades.

The frictions and sticky engagements of conservation 2.0

Anna Tsing argues for ethnographic attention to friction in a globalized world to understand "mobilizing universals" that seek influence and power. She focuses on universals as ambitions or political projects, like "development," "human rights," or "freedom," and argues (2005: 8) that

> universals are effective within particular historical conjunctures that give them content and force. We might specify this conjunctural feature of universals in practice by speaking of engagement. Engaged universals travel across difference and are charged and changed by their travels. Through friction, universals become practically effective. Yet they can never fulfil their promises of universality. Even in transcending localities, they don't take over the world.

Tsing posits friction as an effective ethnographic practice: "Attention to friction opens the possibility of an *ethnographic* account of global interconnection. Abstract claims about the globe can be studied as they operate in the world" (2005: 6). It leads to what she calls "sticky engagements" that should be the center of our ethnographic attention.

On the surface, this seems straightforward enough. In my own research on how conservation actors employ digital media to promote the universal ambition of saving nature, it became quickly evident how they lead to sticky engagements enmeshed with race, gender, class and other power differentials (Büscher 2021). The Dutch online platform "pifworld.nl" is a case in point. It wanted to revolutionize "doing good" in the world. Through their platform, they argued, it became easy to "do good" in other parts of the world, together with online "friends." Their flagship project around 2010–2011 was "the elephant corridor": the construction of a corridor between Botswana (where there were too many elephants) via Namibia to Zambia (where, supposedly, there was still space for elephants).

The project led to much online enthusiasm. Dutch "do-gooders" and larger European donors managed to fundraise over 400,000 euros for its implementation. Local ethnographic study and interviews in Botswana and Zambia, however, revealed that there was no "elephant corridor" and there was never going to be one. One interviewee, the director of an elephant NGO, said that they were "furious that someone else was fundraising for this and they didn't know anything about it." When she "checked it out," she "was floored because it didn't exist—I was absolutely appalled." In conclusion she noted that "I feel money needs to go to where it is needed most and hence they need to be advised where they can best put their money—not in this type of elephant corridor."[6]

The case seemed rather clear-cut given the obvious "rhetoric-reality friction" between online conservation projections and local possibilities and politics. At the same time there was a "stickiness" to the engagements as the project became a major online success for Pifworld. The idea of "saving elephants" was enough to raise over 400,000 euros and draw much attention to the platform, despite flagrant frictions. This, too, is part of Tsing's argument: she compels us to look beyond a simple "clash" of different interests to see how encounters contain zones of conflict *and* new movements or effects as universals like "conservation" confront lived lives.

"Friction" has become influential as part of broader debates on "global ethnography" that provide anthropological insights into how different communities relate to, appropriate, and transform the universals and outside forces they are confronted with while illuminating connections and imaginations that pervade diverse and particular "experiences of globalization" (Burawoy 2000: 5). But Tsing suggested the term for a specific reason. Extending the above quote, she explicates why we *should* refer to frictions: "*we might thus ask about universals not as truths or lies but as sticky engagements*" (2005: 6). This is a more troubling statement, one that deliber-

ately circumvents sticky discussions on "truth" to focus instead on how universals fragment in social encounters. What it dismisses is how, even whether, to historically contextualize and theoretically interpret these sticky engagements to ground action and positionality in the world.

Tsing is not alone in this type of move. Annemarie Mol, in *The body multiple*, states that there is no representational reality out there to ground us but argues that "we may still seek positive interventions"; "instead of truth, goodness comes to the center of the stage" (2002: 165). The question that results is not merely what "goodness" entails but how to theorize this if nothing can ground us in the world. This Mol evades by emphasizing it is "multiple," like ontologies. Both Tsing and Mol deliberately dismiss the question of truth in favor of theoretically nebulous "sticky engagements" or "multiple ontologies." Frictions, in these accounts, foreground *encounters* and singularly emphasize difference, diversity, and multiplicity.[7] Indeed, this has become one of anthropology's driving forces, among others, by celebrating the frictions of different ontological "worlds."[8]

All this is done by deliberately sidelining the idea of truth. But what if this is no longer good enough for anthropology? What if we must acknowledge truth in our planetary socioecological predicaments? What if we are bothered by post-truth? Also: how do we ground our responses to both these questions in something more theoretically solid than "sticky engagements," "multiple ontologies," or even "frictions"? Do we—again—need to reconsider the "world(s)" of anthropology by more deliberately engaging with the idea of truth? I argue that we should. Not just because of post-truth and our troubling global predicaments, but also because it leads to fundamentally different and, dare I say, more germane ethnographic questions and insights.

This was the struggle I faced around 2015–2016, after I had published three articles on my conservation 2.0 research. Up to this point I had more or less followed the "two lives" of ethnography: fieldwork followed by writing (Fassin 2017: 327). I had uncovered some interesting frictions, like that of pifworld.nl mentioned above. But at the same time the bigger picture eluded me. All this was reinforced by the events happening around this time: the emergence of post-truth due to Trump and Brexit and swiftly worsening socioecological crises. And when those same conservationists whose universals I had turned into frictions started to strongly push back against post-truth to uphold "the truth about nature" as they saw it, I was in doubt. I agreed with their unease but also did not dare talk about truth. Instead, I started what I increasingly felt was a next *ethnographic* journey, one whose theoretical drive needed a more explicit grounding in the rapidly transforming power structures that centrally animated the post-truth events, the global crises, *and* the changing online platforms.

This grounding is precisely what Tsing's use of friction lacks. For her, even "powerful centers of finance, science and policy . . . produce only fragments"; they never form part of "a larger unified pattern" (Tsing 2005: 271). Hence, Tsing posits her project directly against a historical materialist understanding that centralizes "the uneven and combined development of capitalist accumulation and exploitation across the globe" (Neveling and Steur 2018: 9). I believe this is profoundly problematic, for the simple reason that it not only evades but deliberately obfuscates our understanding of power in the world and how it ethnographically relates to "real people doing real things" (Kasmir et al. 2023: 1). And this, in turn, hampers anthropology's ability to counter post-truth and speak truth to the power at the roots of contemporary global crises (Salemink and Eriksen 2023).

This is not to say that the term "friction" cannot be useful in ethnographically showing how universal ambitions clash with lived "daily lives" and how this has myriad effects and consequences. But we must be clear about its limits, namely that it cannot help us understand how "global connections" were constructed in the first place, and how these have led to foundational global *contradictions* that fuel contemporary uneven and combined forms of development

around the world (Harvey 2014). In short, it lacks history and a theory of power, particularly as it relates to global capitalism.

This is not just problematic because it cannot theoretically or morally recognize the insidiousness of how capital operates in the world (Kalb 2024), but also more strictly empirically. "Global connections" are very old indeed, and they have changed in particular ways, especially in response to changing power structures (Wolf 2010). Yet we now live in a world where many universals *and* local particularities constantly enter the lifeworlds of communities, of ourselves. As in, *nearly all the time*. Even empirically, then, we need to ask: what if it is increasingly harder to separate many "universals" from "lifeworlds," and these start to hybridize more and more?[9] This is, of course, the case in our digital world—even though this is still extremely uneven across time, space and actors. The key difference is that these universals are not (just) ambitions like "development," "freedom" or "human rights" but modes of (platform) power based on highly universal forms of technology.

The ethnographic implications of the digital have been debated extensively by anthropologists (Coleman 2010), though many still see it as another "encounter element" that shapes communities and lifeworlds.[10] But if, indeed, the digital has become such an innate part of our daily lived lives and for most of the lives of the communities we study—to such a degree that new media scholars keep repeating ad nauseum that any distinction between the online and offline is no longer relevant—we need a deeper understanding of what the "digital" entails.

For one, it stopped being "another site" long ago (if indeed it ever was). Among other revelations, the emergence of post-truth also showed that previously optimistic ideas about the open, egalitarian nature of the digital were highly naïve, if not simply false. Like most other contemporary spaces, the digital is enmeshed in, and has in turn transformed, capitalist forms of power. Hence why the digital is never just another ethnographic "site." It is also and always a form of power that constantly tries to *direct* our lives. How does this dialectical understanding of the digital shape our worlds and that of the communities we study? This becomes an ethnographic-theoretical question in and of itself, one given ample attention by anthropologists (Horst and Miller 2012; Todsen 2020). Yet few have directed this question to probe the critical connections between online platforms, post-truth politics, and new forms of capitalist power.

Platforms, post-truth, and power

What happens when environmentalists turn to digital media to promote "the truth about nature"? What happens if we "follow the clicks" online? This became an ethnographic search that led me into platforms, algorithms, lots of new acronyms, Google, Facebook, Blockchain, and ultimately the way the new platform economy is structured and evolving. I came to realize that this online world was rapidly building a familiar but also distinct form of capitalist power and projecting it onto the world. I struggled to understand this power, but when terms like "platform capitalism" emerged around 2017, the fog started lifting.

Platform capitalism, in short, is the recent and ongoing organizational change of global capitalism to make use of the abundance of data. It was coined by Srnicek (2017: 39), who distinguishes "data (information that something happened) from knowledge (information about why something happened)." The more data platforms can access and record, the more they can link patterns and hence (try to) predict *and* direct our behaviors, preferences and "likes." The universal mechanism that enables this is the algorithm: procedural and calculative decision mechanisms or sets of rules that sort data and process these according to particular modes of reasoning. In this way, they estimate "knowledge." But because this "knowledge" is ultimately based on data combined with (for us unknown) algorithmic rationalities, it becomes a knowledge focused on *correlation*—for exam-

ple between keywords, hyperlinks, and other data.

What emerges is a mode of distributing information and knowledge where "effective intensity comes to stand in for and displace referential 'truth,' authenticity, and factual evidence" (Andrejevic 2013: 140)—effectively submitting the veracity of knowledge (claims) to market legitimacy. Hence why Rouvroy (2013) refers to algorithmic knowledge as "knowledge without truth." *Why* I am, for example, interested in saving nature becomes irrelevant compared to the information *that* I want to save nature. The truth or "objective fact," according to algorithms, is the latter. "Likes" and "shares" on platforms are expressions of equivalence *interpreted* as expressions of affection or support. In short: digital platforms function through *universal* mechanisms that are literally *post* truth.

Understanding these basic and universal digital mechanisms led me to conclude that sharing "the truth about nature" online stimulates the very forces that undermine truth (about nature or otherwise) by promoting post-truth. In this way, post-truth is different from its common use as "emotions trumping ratio in politics" tied to specific individuals (like Trump or others). In my conceptualization, post-truth is not something that individuals do; it is an *expression of power under platform capitalism*. This means it is also not some updated variant of lies or bullshit. Online platforms do not care whether those active and leaving data online are honest, lying, or bullshitting, as long as they traverse the platform and leave behind data that can be sold to advertisers. Many actors (consciously or intuitively) understand this and actively use it to their benefit, thus rendering post-truth a *dialectical* (structural and agentic) expression of power under platform capitalism.[11]

This conceptualization of post-truth frames questions asked by anthropologists in response to post-truth in a particular way: how to position ourselves as anthropologists (Ho and Cavanaugh 2019)? How to study this new form of power? And how to relate this to ethnography? I labeled this framing a "political ecology of truth." "Political ecology" because it links ecology and politics, the natural and the social sciences, and hence different types of (universal and ethnographic) knowledge and knowing while seeing them as interconnected. "Political" also refers to the stakes involved in knowing from differential vantage points of culture, power, race, gender, and more. "Of truth" because it takes Foucault seriously in that truth is always power and that, through studying power, we can better understand truths as they manifest in the world. It means taking the truth of the ecological crisis seriously, while seeing this simultaneously as politically mediated. The next section delves into this political ecology of truth, after which implications for ethnography are explored.

A political ecology of truth

The political ecology of truth I propose is an epistemological positioning around three core statements that combine ethnographic knowledge and political economy, specifically under platform capitalism. The first is that *post-truth is an expression of power under platform capitalism*, not some updated variant of lies or bullshit. As explained, what matters here is that if we want to search for truth, we have to study power. I accept that not all anthropological research should or needs to study power; this would impoverish anthropology. But given that post-truth directly challenges and disempowers *any* form of knowledge—whether "true(er)" or not—and if I am right that post-truth is an expression of power itself, any attempt to position ourselves vis-à-vis post-truth would mean that we need to study this form of power. Hence why I argue that this conceptualization of post-truth prods a deeper understanding of changing forms of capitalist power. In other words, it is the specific form of platform capitalist power that is currently dominant that enables—even thrives on—post-truth. In one way or another, I believe anthropology needs to position itself in relation to this form of power. I will come back to this below.

At the same time, if post-truth bothers us and post-truth is an expression of power, then a clear case for reemphasizing the importance of truth is made: *Truth is important because if nothing truthful can be said about power, how could we ever understand, let alone confront it?* Again, as we know from Foucault, truth and power are always connected:

> The important thing here is that truth isn't outside power, or lacking in power. . . . Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its régime of truth, its "general politics" of truth: that is, the types of discourses which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. (Foucault 1980: 131)

This famous quote is fascinating in many respects, especially in relation to new media platforms that undermine *any* regime of truth. But Foucault, importantly, did not merely argue that truth and power are always interconnected. He also emphasized the liberating potential of this insight: "it's not a matter of emancipating truth from every system of power (which would be a chimera, for truth is already power) *but of detaching the power of truth from the forms of hegemony, social, economic and cultural, within which it operates at the present time*" (ibid.: 133; cf. Foucault 2008: 356). This phrasing is interesting. It suggests that while truth is power, it is *simultaneously* more than that, which *gives* it power. Precisely what Foucault means might be gleaned from what he stated in his last lecture series. Tellingly entitled "the courage of truth," Foucault, according to Frédéric Gros, emphasized truth as "that which makes a difference in the world and in people's opinions, that which forces one to transform one's mode of being, that whose difference opens up the perspective of an other world to be constructed, to be imagined" (ibid.).

I take Foucault's prompt seriously. If we wish to realistically understand and confront the environmental crisis in the era of post-truth, then "the courage of truth" in the sense of *speaking truth to power* is precisely what is at stake, both in theory and in practice. But it is hard to promote the art of speaking truth to power if truth can only ever be uttered in brackets. As something that exists solely to be deconstructed rather than also constructed or sought after. As something that only leads to discursive wars and not (also) to common understanding. Speaking truth to power can render truth productive by saying something accurate about power *such that one can see beyond it*; such that "the perspective of an other world to be constructed, to be imagined" opens up. Hence the second statement: *truth is not just power, but also more-than-power*. And hence why this statement makes transformation possible.

But in order to speak truth to power, we need to more deliberately think through the relations between knowledge, understanding, and data, which leads me to the third and final statement: *the relations between data, knowledge and understanding are increasingly confused and corrupted*. Disentangling them makes truth possible.

Platform capitalist power: Implications for ethnography

Data, as mentioned, is "information that something happened," which Srnicek (2017: 39) distinguishes from *knowledge* ("information about why something happened"). Both are different from *understanding*, which according to Hannah Arendt makes knowledge meaningful. Platform capitalists like Mark Zuckerberg incessantly colonize our lifeworlds to capture as much data about us as possible. They do this to build knowledge about us that they can sell to advertisers; hence why they want to keep us online as long as possible—consciously or uncon-

sciously (through tracking devices in phones, etc.). For Zuckerberg, however, meaning comes from connections (which incidentally is what his company focuses on facilitating (Zuckerberg and Fridman 2022). But since this is commodified connection, it also hollows out meaning by instrumentalizing it for commercial gain. In the process, two by now familiar things happen that worry digital media scholars like Shoshana Zuboff, Byung-Chul Han, Siva Vaidhyanathan and others: it allows us to retreat ever deeper into individualized reality bubbles, thereby creating more division and separation in societies while rendering (generic and self-)surveillance increasingly totalizing (though see Hobbis and Hobbis 2022).

Here is where Hannah Arendt's (1994: 97) words are critical when she argues that "without reality shared with other human beings, truth loses all meaning." This is because, for her, truth is on the same level as understanding: a process of transcending knowledge such that it provides meaning. And this meaning, I argue, emanates principally from three things: context, history, and positionality. Hence: *taking into account context, history and (others') positionality in order to transcend these into something commonly meaningful* is the hallmark of truth.

This conceptualization of truth shows why platform capitalism is so important in understanding post-truth: because its quest for algorithmic online capturing of all context, history, and positionality cannot be *transcended* into something common that provides meaning. Instead, it can only be *fragmented* into *universal equivalents*, namely meaningless data privatized for commercial ends so as to allow translation into that other universal equivalent: money.[12] These two universals, data and money, are to a good degree invisibilized under platform capitalism: many platform services pretend to be free while most of us deal with programmatic and highly engaging interfaces rather than with data directly.

At the same time, it is impossible for platform capitalism to hide this meaninglessness. For one, this happens by algorithmically muddling fragments of people's lives (and associated positionalities, contexts and histories) together on timelines that—perfunctorily—do not care whether something is accurate or not, meaningful or not, truthful or not. Second, because perceived legitimacy of knowledge increasingly derives from market dynamics: under platform power, many people, including many academics, look for what generates likes, shares and followers (or citations). The swift circulation of discourse that sells, knowledge that generates likes and followers is more important under platform capitalism than (any idea of) "truth." And when something generates a lot of likes or followers, it is often assumed to have some relevance or value. Hence why the relations between data, knowledge, and understanding are increasingly confused and corrupted: the epistemological focus of our dominant form of power has shifted from understanding and even from knowledge to data: the kernel upon which artificial intelligence–induced commercial platform success can be built.

Korean philosopher Byung-Chul Han refers to this as "Dataism," which according to him is the "result of a renunciation of meaning and context; data is meant to fill the vacuum of meaning" (2021: 42). At the same time, he and others warn of the growing digital panopticon that the majority of the world's citizens are now under to lesser or greater degree:

> As a new form of production, digital communication seeks to dismantle protected spaces and transform everything into information and data. Through this process, all protective distance is lost. In the context of hypercommunication, everything is mixed up with everything else. The borders between inside and outside become more and more permeable. Humans become interfaces within a totally interconnected world. Hypercapitalism furthers and exploits this digital defenselessness. (Ibid.: 26)

Many anthropologists would now sound cautionary notes and rightly point to exceptions (Hobbis and Hobbis 2022). But this does not abrogate the fact that the relations between data-knowledge-understanding are *deliberately* corrupted by platform capitalism and its propensity toward post-truth. This corruption is, according to Zuboff (2019), at the basis of a form of *totalitarian* power that exceeds and inverts the "universals" Tsing talks about: it *literally* wants to turn everything in the world into universal data. It may never get there, but given the damage to societies and individuals it can do in the process, ruthless critique and resistance are warranted. Hence why we urgently need to reassess the relations between data, knowledge and understanding in order to speak truth to power.

The question is how? And what is the role for ethnography in this? There are many possible answers, and I do not pretend to have conclusive ones. What I do believe is critical, as mentioned, is that anthropology needs to position itself in relation to these new forms of (totalitarian) power, which also means positioning itself vis-à-vis the *planetary totality* this power actively envisions, builds, and to an important degree has already facilitated.

My consequent core and perhaps anthropologically daring suggestion is that ethnography should find a balance between *frictions* (things that chafe; the "sticky engagements" of externals, even "worlds") and *tensions* (things that stretch, that comprise internal strain, even "infarction"). The latter, while potentially even more violent than frictions, may also reorient ethnography toward the question of truth, especially in terms of speaking truth to power.[13] It inverts Tsing's argument that "we might thus ask about universals not as truths or lies but as sticky engagements" (2015: 6) into "we might thus ask about sticky engagements not only as fragmented encounters but as points of tension to search for and speak truth, especially to universalizing, even totalitarian forms of power."

A focus on *tension* moves away from a conceptualization of power as something external, as encounter, something that travels and affects others who then respond, resulting in friction. Instead, it emphasizes a conception of post-truth, platform power that feeds on *positive* internal intensification. The violence of friction is about clashes or external pressures, colonization, and so forth. The violence of tension is burnout and depression caused by internal stretch and strain. Han refers to this as the "violence of positivity," which "doesn't deprive, it saturates; it doesn't execute, it exhausts. It expresses itself not as repression but as depression" (2018: 72). This is precisely what platform power drastically intensifies: it allows people to positively expose themselves, thereby saturating them through the need for likes, shares, citations and followers.

The implication for ethnography is that we need to balance a *global ethnography of friction* focused on how universals fragment into connections, forces, and imaginations, with a *planetary ethnography of tension* focused on how fragmentary connections, forces and imaginations cohere into universalizing forms of power. The former, in Tsing's (2005: 271) words, uses "ethnographic fragments to interrupt stories of a unified and successful regime of global self-management." It turns "claims about scale, including globalization" into an "arena of contention." This remains important. My argument is not against friction as ethnographic practice, even when I hold that Tsing's use of it is theoretically, empirically, and historically inadequate. My objective is to complement friction as an ethnography of paying attention to how universals fragment into things "less controllable than those at the top imply" (ibid.) with tension as a planetary ethnography of how fragments can also cohere into a broader story that makes common sense in terms of its ability to speak truth to power.

Toward a planetary ethnography

Moving from global to planetary ethnography follows a broader shift in the literature from the

global to the planetary, poignantly captured by Arboleda (2020: 15–16):

> The very idea of the "global" as the proverbial blue marble demarcated and measured through grids and coordinates is being gradually superseded by that of the "planetary," in which the earth reemerges as an unfamiliar place riddled with eerie, destructive, and menacing forces. As opposed to the "spaces of flows" and "liquid modernities" that populated earlier visions of globalization, the notion of the planetary designates a convoluted terrain where fences, walls, and militarized borders coexist with sprawling supply chains and complex infrastructures of connectivity.

Clearly, we have seen an incredible intensification of planetary connections over past decades, including the infiltration of platform capitalism in many nooks and crannies of the planet hitherto unconnected or marginally so. Hence, capital and data together are creating more of a lived sense of being part of a planetary totality—something that planetary ethnography needs to capture.[14] The last thing that planetary ethnography should do, however, is debate *how far* the planetary has succeeded, or *how much* of the planet is now connected. This is fruitless. My argument is that the planetary—even more so than the concept of the *Anthropocene*—signals a *qualitative* shift in the state of the capitalist totality. This is a shift from a focus on the promise and peril of external relations integrating, chafing and affecting one another (leading to frictions) to a focus on the straining or promising (re)arrangements of already-integrated, mutually affecting internal relations (leading to tensions). The latter allows for the "eerie," "menacing" dominant consciousness that Arboleda tries to capture in political-economic terms (others, like Chakrabarty 2021, do so more from an earth-system perspective).

Planetary ethnography thus takes seriously the idea of a planetary capitalist totality, which is antithetical to much contemporary anthropological theory (with important exceptions: Cowan et al. 2023; Kalb 2015, 2024: 3). To clarify, this totality does not mean that "everything" is now fully subsumed under capital. As Mau (2023: 250) argues:

> It might very well be that there is nothing on this earth which is not somehow *affected* by capital, but that is not the same as saying that everything has been subsumed under capital or that capital has taken hold of all dimensions of social life. The social as well as natural world is shaped by innumerable forces which do not derive from the logic of capital—not only because these forces have been able to keep the logic of capital at bay but also because capital is not a supervillain seeking to rule the entire world.

He adds that as long as capital "is able to keep a firm grip on the fundamental conditions of social reproduction, it does not need to meticulously control everything." Mau thus argues for being precise about where and how capitalist power fits within the "social totality." Following, Goonewardena (2018: 461), building on Lukaçs, argues that totality is important to "think holistically." While he acknowledges that "the very sound of 'totality' in the overdeveloped capitalist world (which penetrates into the Global South as well) offends like bad breath," he makes an important plea for the term:

> It would be essential to eschew the clichéd postmodern view of totality as tantamount to totalitarianism and not erroneously equate totalizing thought with reductive, over-generalizing, and indeed un-holistic thinking. For the recognition that the concept of totality in . . . critical theory includes by definition dialectical notions of contradiction, difference, mediation, and articulation is most helpful to theorize how capitalism, patriarchy, and colonialism co-determine the com-

> plex whole of society—which it is the task of revolutionary politics to interpret and change. (Ibid.: 467)

This "complex whole of society" is what planetary ethnography aims to capture, with a specific aim to push "revolutionary politics" through speaking truth to power. My plea for a planetary ethnography is therefore in line with Salemink and Eriksen's (2023: 5) important call "for anthropology to come clean as a countercultural, radical science which does not limit itself to the study of human diversity, but shows how the current, overheated global capitalist system is ecologically destructive, conducive to increased inequality and alienation, and lacking morality." To do so, however, we need to understand the power of the totality of this "overheated global capitalist system" and speak truth to its power (Kalb 2024; forthcoming). Planetary ethnography is what Bubandt and Otto (2010: 11) call an anthropological "experiment in holism," which they argue sits "uneasily at the core of anthropological theory and practice." Holism

> should be understood as part and parcel of human practice in general. When human beings act, they imagine—implicitly and explicitly—contexts in which their actions make sense and in which they and others figure as agents. These practical holisms vary in scale and scope and can be more or less totalizing in their effects. It is anthropology's difficult but socially and academically important task to critically illuminate, describe, and engage in these holisms in the world.

The planetary is a holism that focuses on the social, political-economic state of the earth as a whole and how this changes historically. In short, positionality, context and history are ethnographically analyzed and described from a world-historical anthropological position that sees capitalism dialectically as an emergent totality (Ollman 2003: 72). It tries to understand what has come from what Marx (1998: 54–57) alluded to in *The German ideology*, namely that "only with this universal development of productive forces is a *universal* intercourse between men established, which on the one side produces in *all* nations simultaneously the phenomenon of the 'propertyless' mass (universal competition), making each nation dependent on the revolutions of the others, and finally puts *world-historical*, empirically universal individuals in place of local ones." The anthropological question is whether the dominant consciousness of the planetary that has arisen over the past decades[15] has now led to "world-historical universal individuals."

My answer to this question is a tentative yes. Yes, because I believe platform capitalism has arisen as a universalizing, even totalitarian form of power that birthed a particular planetary state of historical capitalism and a concomitant dominant consciousness. Within this state, assuming that individuals are not somehow already connected to, influenced by, or part of this social totality is not obvious, even in the most remote or marginalized spaces. In my understanding of Marx's quote above, it is precisely individuals' regular, if not constant connection to universalizing forms of capitalist power that makes the "world-historical" moment of the planetary a unique state with a "dominant consciousness" marred by the intense socioecological predicaments of our time. But I am tentative as well, because the precise form of this universal connection is always an ethnographic, empirical question where friction and tension dialectically interrelate. This is crucial not only from a more common anthropological epistemic perspective but also because platform capitalist power *depends on* this dialectic: it needs a fragmented world in order to cohere as a universal, capitalist social totality.

The question is how to study the planetary state of the capitalist totality ethnographically? I believe that the dialectics that animated anthropology for a long time reasserts itself with urgency here. This arises from the fact that di-

alectics focuses on *internalized* relations, not external(ized) relations, in relation to both individual and planetary totalities. *It switches analytical, ethnographic focus from encounters between things to forms of strain within things*. This has several consequences. First, it cannot assume a priori that certain "universal" forces come from just somewhere without *already* being connected in one way or another. At a minimum, one cannot assume that connections do not already exist, rather than the opposite: that something from somewhere in the world travels and gets taken up in surprising ways simply because the "receivers" are not already implicated. These dialectical types of analysis are known through their focus on combined and uneven development (Kasmir et al. 2023; Neveling and Steur 2018) and need urgent further uptake and expansion in the years ahead. What they allow is a closer examination of currently prevalent types of power, and so enable speaking truth to the specific forms of power that render knowledge increasingly meaningless and stimulate post-truth.

This leads me to the second connotation to tension, which brings me back to my conceptualization of truth as a common epistemological solidity that takes serious *and* simultaneously transcends history, context, and positionality. I can explain this through the difference between *speaking fact to power* and *speaking truth to power*. The former does not make sense. The reason is precisely because a fact is a solid statement outside of history, context, and positionality. Taking into account history, context, and positionality is what causes *internal* tension with regards to solid and common knowledge; this is precisely the point and the challenge of the (never-ending) search for understanding.

Ethnography is well placed to come in here; after all, focusing on history, context, and positionality is what ethnography is good at. An ethnography that embraces the dialectical epistemological tension between the solid ground of universalizing forms of capitalist power and the shifting sands of history, context, and positionality in everyday life is precisely what can function as an antidote to post-truth. It can do so in any circumstances. But a central argument of this article is that it would become (even) more *productive* if it is focused on or related to power; by being explicitly focused on speaking truth to power so as to counter post-truth and radically challenge the intense socioecological predicaments haunting our "current, overheated global capitalist system" (Salemink and Eriksen 2023: 5).

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Notes

1. A debate with deep roots, including on dialectical anthropology from the 1960s/1970s onward (Boyer 2007), the controversies around "writing culture" (Clifford and Marcus 1986), and more (Harris 2007).
2. This is the explicit aim of Meta's Connectivity initiative and OneWeb's "Connectivity Undivided," which aims to ensure that "rural communities and remote industries are no longer left in a technological void" (https://oneweb.net/connectivity-undivided).
3. Something that anthropologists have written about extensively (Kasmir et al. 2023), though less so under platform capitalism.
4. As stated in the introduction text to the 2022 *Netherlands Anthropology Day*, where this article was first presented as a keynote address.

5. The article builds on and inverts the structure of the book that it is based on (Büscher 2021) and includes some segments from the book.
6. Interview with director of local conservation NGO, 24 July 2013, Kasane, Botswana.
7. See the volume edited by Omuru et al. (2019), *The world multiple*, especially Tsing's chapter, where she emphasizes this in direct relation to Mol's work (page 238).
8. See here the massive literatures on the pluriverse, ontological turn, etc. For example: Omuru et al. (2019).
9. This has been much recognized in anthropology, for example through the collapse of emic and etic into "emetic anthropologies" (Jensen 2019).
10. A prominent example is Boelstorff (2008), which emphasizes that it focuses strictly on the worlds of participants as they play out online.
11. This conceptualization of post-truth chimes with Mair's (2023: 164) point that most explanations "rely on external factors, leaving alleged post-truthers as passive subjects of powerful social forces and actors." He argues that "the most revealing anthropology often works by explaining what ways of thinking and doing look like from the inside, from the point of view of an active, first-person subject." While my conceptualization derives from structural forces, it emphasizes dialectics between "external" forces and inside-agentic perspectives that creatively employ these forces.
12. In 2005, Tsing could not know about platform capitalism yet, but this tendency toward fragmentation makes her "endorsement of the fragment" rather painful.
13. Hence not in the way proposed by Holbraad (2012: 46), whose "ethnographically driven" recursive analysis basically seeks to invert truth judgments.
14. The idea of planetary ethnography has been mentioned once before according to my knowledge, as part of the ARIES project (www.aries-project.com). The project focuses on the extraterrestrial planetary and planetary discussions, not on relations with platform capitalism and truth. See: https://osf.io/preprints/socarxiv/sy2gh/.
15. Which Tsing (2015) herself poignantly alluded to in her book on "the possibility of life in capitalist ruins" while subsequently doing even less theoretical justice to capitalism than in her book on friction.

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